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ABSTRACT

Many school corporations have reacted to the current financial and political climate by reducing their administrative staffs. This places more responsibility on the remaining administrators, who must do more with less. This paper discusses the implications of downsizing for educational administrators. Various leadership theories, particularly the theory of situational leadership, have been developed that emphasize the need for flexible organizational leadership. Demands placed on school leaders have stretched that flexibility to the limit. The downsizing of educational administration raises the following questions: (1) Who will provide leadership and make decisions if a vacuum of leadership is created? and (2) How can building-level administrators, who become increasingly involved in bureaucratic operations, continue to meet the needs of students and teachers? The paper argues that the reduction-in-force of administrators is a short-sighted solution for meeting schools' complex needs and that it discourages educational leaders from practicing effective leadership. (LMI)

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LEADERSHIP IN AN ERA OF RETRENCHMENT

by

John R. Cochren

Abstract

Many school corporations are reacting to the current financial and political climate by reducing their administrative staffs. The result of such activity is requiring school administrators to more actively adhere to the concept of retrenchment, "doing more with less."

Various leadership theories have been developed that have emphasized the need for flexibility on the part of leadership in organizations. Demands placed upon school leaders today by society have stretched this flexibility to the limit.

The effects of reducing administrators is politically correct in the current era, but is short sighted as a solution to meeting the complex needs of the schools. A return to enlightened practices of leadership is required.

Recently, two Indiana school corporations made announcements concerning the realignment and reduction of their administrative staffs. In both situations, the actions occurred as a result of not having enough money to achieve the mission and goals of the school corporations. These are but two examples of what is happening in many school corporations in our country today.

The concept of retrenchment is becoming a standard, accepted way of life in the daily operations of our schools. A simplified interpretation of retrenchment is "doing more with less." Leaders of educational institutions are being called upon to confront more complex problems with fewer

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resources. These problems are not sought out by the administrative leadership in schools, but are a result of the demands and realities that exist in society today. A standard reaction to this dilemma is to reduce administrators in order to reallocate money to other needs. This practice appears to be a short term solution to problems that are not going to diminish.

Educational leaders are faced, as always, with managing change. Rydz (1986) described change as the state in which the future will not flow in orderly fashion from today as we have been accustomed. Change in education has always been with us, but it has never been as pervasive as it is now. Hughes (1994) indicated the complexity of these changes by summarizing them into the following areas: leadership, decentralization, restructuring, human resources development, demographic shifts, and changing legal frameworks. Hughes did not list inadequate funding or violence in schools as major areas but they are major concerns for school administrators. Although each area identified is of crucial concern, the lack of adequate funding inhibits the development of solutions to most of the problems identified.

Educational leaders are currently faced with providing a different approach to managing change. Knezevich (1984) summarized this perspective by advocating that resistance to

change is usually associated with growth. He offered that retrenchment is a change no less painful than accommodation to growth. Knezevich concluded that criticisms of educational leaders who must implement what is an economic and educational necessity may be more severe than those relating to changing and modifying the curriculum. As a result of taxpayer opposition to increased funding and legislative gridlock in meeting the needs of local schools, most educational leaders are faced with providing leadership that involves retrenchment.

Effective leadership has been described in a variety of ways. Tannebaum and Schmidt (1973) believed that effective leadership could not be isolated in to one particular category, but viewed effective leadership as being on a fluctuating continuum. They concluded that effective leaders adjusted their approach depending upon the situations they confronted. Today's leaders certainly have to develop the flexible ability to adapt, adjust, and overcome the situations that face them.

Schien (1965) observed that leaders must have the personal flexibility in range of skills necessary to vary their own behavior according to the needs and drives of their subordinates. Today, leaders must adjust to a more dramatic change as boards and central office personnel are turning over at a quicker pace than ever before.

The belief that the situation confronted determined the most appropriate leadership style evolved into the theory of situational leadership. Leaders of today are confronted with complex decisions that defy simplistic solutions or approaches. As a result, they are faced with choices that make them encompass Fiedler's (1967) suggestions. Those choices are that they can change the behavior of the members of their organization, change their own methods of making decisions, or they can change their positions. Unfortunately, many capable leaders are forced to choose the third option.

Hersey and Blanchard (1988) concluded that the leader is capable and should select the appropriate leadership style to meet the particular situation confronted in the organizational environment. The very real difficulty in applying situational leadership, or any other leadership model, today is the rapidly changing environments present in educational institutions. As indicated earlier, this reality is evident in organizations as exemplified by the high turnover of board members, superintendents, and central office personnel. In addition there is an increasing shift in decision making from the local to the state level. Each of these examples helps to produce an environment in which the leader has to reassess the political structure within the organization. As a result, there is a lapse in the

ability of the leader to decisively implement effective decisions.

As decisions are made that reduce the numbers of administrators in school corporations, considerations should be given to the following inherent results. Leadership and decision making will always occur. The question to be confronted is who will provide the leadership and who will make the decisions. Last year in Indiana, a law was proposed that would limit the ability of school boards to make certain decisions and would restrict their activities to policy making. The bill failed to pass but is evidence of a concern that some board members were making decisions that were considered in the realm of administrative decisions. If a vacuum of leadership is created as a result of declining numbers of qualified administrators, this vacuum will be filled by someone.

Another concern to be considered is the very real effect that will occur in the operation of the schools. We have become very accustomed to the way our schools operate and the organizational procedures within those schools. As central office administrators are eliminated, building level administrators are going to have to become more involved in helping to meet the bureaucratic requirements that are a part of every school corporation and are imposed by State Departments of Education and federal compliance

requirements. The basic result is that this will take time away from meeting the increasing demands of students and teachers. Although in times of bargaining strife, teacher leaders are quick to suggest that administrators can be cut in order to secure funds necessary to bring about a contract, these suggestions are rapidly forgotten the next year as the demands upon teachers increase.

Today's leaders are faced with very real problems as they strive to meet the challenges of providing innovative and effective leadership in an environment that is retrenchment oriented. Kouzes and Posner (1987) analyzed leadership skills and noted five fundamental practices that enabled leaders to accomplish extraordinary things in organizations. When leaders were at their best, they challenged the process, inspired a shared vision, enabled others to act, modeled the way, and encouraged the heart. Leaders of today are currently discouraged from practicing these traits although school corporations and society desperately need the very best leadership that administrators can provide.

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